



# ECCS

## Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington

Testimony of Joanne Kelleher, Executive Director of Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington in opposition to HB-6659 - An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, And Making Appropriations Therefor.

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Governor's proposed budget for the Office of Early Childhood.

My name is Joanne Kelleher and I live in Southington. I am the Executive Director of Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington, a non-profit that supports families and early childhood educators in town. Our mission is to ensure that all children are healthy and ready to learn.

We are one of 34 local early childhood collaboratives covering 59 towns across the state (see list at [Local Partners - Connecticut Children's Collective \(ctchildrenscollective.org\)](https://ctchildrenscollective.org/)). Twenty-four of these, including the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington, have received funding from Federal Preschool Development grants via the OEC and the CT Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, but that funding is running out.

These local early childhood collaboratives (LECC's), with the help of their Parent Ambassadors, provide essential infrastructure, educational programs, resources, and core staffing for coordination of services at the local level. You can learn more about these LECC's in a report issued by the Connecticut Children's Collective, at [CTCC-2022-Data-Report.pdf \(ctchildrenscollective.org\)](https://ctchildrenscollective.org/CTCC-2022-Data-Report.pdf).

The OEC included funding for support of the local collaboratives in their original budget options, but this was not included by OPM in the Governor's budget. **I am asking you to please add \$1 million to the Office for Early Childhood budget to continue funding for the 24 local early childhood collaboratives in FY24. We ask that this be increased to \$2 million in FY 25 to allow expanded coverage through the creation of 24 additional collaboratives so that every town benefits from local coordination.**

The OEC budget does include funding for the Parent Cabinet program which supports two Parent Cabinet members in each DCF region to try to increase parent voice in the OEC, but without the Parent Ambassadors at the local level you are cutting off the connection to engaged parents across the State.

As a non-profit that supports the families with young children and the childcare providers locally, we see firsthand how the early care and education system in our town and our state is in crisis and is in need of support.

**In addition to funding for local collaboratives, I am also asking you to increase funding for the Care4Kids program, wage supports for childcare providers, School Readiness rates at State Funded Early Childhood Education programs and Birth to Three supports.**

Finding an opening for quality childcare here in Southington, especially for infants and toddlers, is very difficult for families. I get contacted every week by people looking for help finding care and so the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington has been tracking [openings on the ECCS website](#). Families have been unable to return to work for lack of childcare at any cost and those who earn lower incomes have even fewer options. The situation has been bad for years, but the pandemic has made it worse. If the childcare industry fails, then there will be far-ranging health and economic impacts.

#### **Care4Kids pays providers too little and serves a fraction of the families that struggle with child care costs**

The Governor's proposal to add \$14.2 million and \$53 million to the Care4Kids program is necessary, but in no way sufficient. The Governor's proposal will increase the value of Care4Kids certificates to keep up with the inflation in child care costs which is very important, but this budget assumes that 2,000 fewer children will receive the subsidy at a time when tens of thousands of families are struggling with the cost of child care. We need to do both. Raise the value of the Care4Kids certificates and serve more families.

Many of the families in my community make too much to qualify for Care4Kids at the 50% SMI cut-off but would at the 60% rate.

#### **Wages for Early Educators are too low**

Early educators are some of the lowest paid workers in the economy. The average wage for a child care worker is \$14.97, and for a preschool teacher it's \$15.18. Self employed family child care providers typically work much longer hours and average less than \$8.50 per hour.

Last year, all 11 childcare centers in Southington and 4 of the preschools were desperately looking for staff. Due to health concerns, stress, and especially, low pay (in the \$13 to \$16 per hour range), early childhood educators are changing careers and leaving the industry. They could be paid more, and receive benefits, by switching to the public schools or working retail. This staff shortage has led to empty classrooms in Southington's childcare centers and long waiting lists for families. The number of family childcare providers in town has decreased as these small businesses have closed. The increased minimum wage and empty classrooms are putting more financial pressure on childcare centers. One director shared with me that she was praying for a snow day to get relief from their payroll but that is no way to balance a budget.

#### **Payments to State Funded ECE programs are too low**

The Governor's proposal to raise the School Readiness rates to \$10,500 in FY25 falls far short of what is needed. The per child rates have been unchanged since 2015 when minimum wage was \$9.15. By the start of FY24 the minimum wage will have gone up by 64%. OEC's Narrow Cost Analysis puts the cost of pre-k at \$16,138

The State Funded programs, as well as the private providers, who provide 70% of the childcare in the State, need a substantial raise now! To retain teachers and attract the new staff needed to reopen closed classrooms, wages must go up.

Financial support could help stabilize the situation by providing on-going, substantial wage supplements and benefits for small private centers, nonprofit centers (including religious programs) and family child care providers.

The ENTIRE system needs equitable support across all settings. We need to fix childcare in Connecticut by making high quality childcare affordable and available to every family that needs it while supporting

the providers with a fair wage, benefits, and other supports. Making an investment in the local early childhood collaborative infrastructure, by adding this to the Governor's budget, will make all other OEC investments more effective.

Thank you for your time.

Thank you.



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***About the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington***

*The Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington is a group of committed educators, parents, grandparents, healthcare and childcare providers, business owners, civic organizations and members of the community who are deeply invested in the growth, development and academic success of young children in Southington. The Collaborative's mission is that "all Southington children are healthy and ready to learn."*

*The ECCS, as one of the local early childhood collaboratives in the State, is dedicated to three goals: 1) Advocating for high quality preschool and childcare; 2) Empowering parents and families through workshops and educational programs; and 3) Being a wide-ranging resource for community members on the subject of early childhood care and education.*

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